

Business Buyers' Expectations in Buyer-Seller Encounters

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Abstract—Selling has changed. Selling has taken on aspects of relationship marketing and sales force play a critical role in developing long-term relationships between buyers and sellers which is seen to serve the company's targets and create success for a long run. The purpose of this study was to examine what really matters in buyer-seller encounters and determine what expectations business buyers have. We studied 17 business buyers by a qualitative interview. We found that buyers appreciate encounters where the salesperson face the buyer as a way he or she is as a person, map the real needs to improve buyers' business and build up cooperation for long-term relationship. This study show that personality matters are a key elements when satisfying business buyers' expectations.

Keywords—Business-to-Business, Business buyer-seller encounters, Business buyer, Expectations, Perceived similarity, Personal selling, Personality types.

I. INTRODUCTION

IN today's business world, it is challenging to specialize from competitors' solutions and services. Almost all companies on the same industry have the same solutions, services and technologies. The interesting part is that the only differing thing may be the sales force. Research shows that the sales is moving all the time closer to the relationships marketing, thus, often the salesperson is the only link between the business buyer and the sales organization. In marketing and sales literature, we lack of exact information what really happens in encounters between the business customer and the salesperson in this changed environment. Although the business and marketing research has discussed several years about sales and sales management's important role in developing and maintaining cooperative relationships and value creation. Hence, the sales literature haven't been able to define business customers' expectations whereas this study is positioned [1], [4]-[7], [13]. Additionally, salesperson's selling activities are expected to change in the near future due to the fact that there is plenty of information available where to choose. It is said that 58 percent of buyers have made their purchasing decision before even meeting the salesperson for the first time [3]. Selling is different today than before. The transactional sales will move into digital channels and the salespersons will move to those encounters which require personal selling activities. These changes challenge the salespersons and sales organizations. If the salesperson has managed to get a meeting with a business buyer, the buyers' expectations need to be satisfied. Hence, the skills of the sales

force are becoming more important than ever. This rapidly changed business situation and complexity requires of a salesperson self-efficacy and confidence towards own personality and behavior [4], [5], [7], [20]. Furthermore, salespeople need to have a deep knowledge to be able to help customers' to see different possibilities to do business. Salesperson need to see their role as an architect of change for their customers [5].

Today's business buyers' are not prone to spend their time in sales meetings if the meeting isn't satisfying their expectations. This takes a salesperson to a new situation. How to spend the given time? The literature isn't paid enough attention to the buyers' expectations of what should happen in a meeting, what really satisfies the buyers' expectations nowadays, and how the buyers' understand the value, how they define the most discussed topic in marketing and sales literature.

In this study, the aim is to define the buyer's expectations of the buyer-seller encounters in this changed situation. There is an increasing interest in the recent sales literature to examine the role of sales, interpersonal skills, the importance of communication and interaction while creating the value, rethink the customer solutions, needs identification and transforming the sales [1], [2], [5], [7], [17], [18], but nor from the point of view of the buyers. Because of the changes in business the sales profession is more demanding than earlier and it is necessary to study expectations to the buyer-seller encounters' within the scope of this new situation. In the literature is a cap on business buyer's side and especially now in this complex environment it is important to study expectations.

This study concentrates on the buyer-seller interaction from the buyer's point of view and to the business buyers' expectations based on the Myers-Briggs personality theory. Approach in this study is qualitative interview which allows, instead of the previous studies, to understand the question of buyer's expectations on a deeper level. This research found out that the personality facts plays a big role in buyers' expectations to the buyer-seller encounters. This study reveals that the buyers' expect the salespersons to approach them at the same kind like the buyers' are and by acting responsibly, offering solutions that fit to the buyer's needs now and in the future. And that the value should be developed based on buyer's personality types.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Business sales profession is defined in the marketing and sales literature many ways but in [5] the sales literature it is

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defined as a

“Phenomenon of human-driven interaction between and within individuals/organizations in order to bring about economic exchange within a value creation context”.

This definition of the sales is transforming the sales and giving it to a meaning on a human-driven phenomenon. Marketing and sales literature have discussed lately more about value creation in buyer-seller encounters [1], [7], [8], although on practical side, the sales organizations have begun to better respond to buyers' demands and behaviors by co-creating and interacting with their customers' [17]. Like discussed earlier, in the extant sales literature only a few studies revolve the interaction-based understanding what sales person's really do or should do to fulfill buyers' needs or even how to better understand human perceptions and draw out buyers latent needs and motivations [7], [8].

Today sales profession contributes to conceive buyer value by mapping buyers' needs and fulfilling these needs in a cooperation with the business buyer. The role of sales is demanding and the demands are more and more from a comprehensive perspective and skills set than earlier [1]. This may due of a buyers' complex business and solution needs to which may be challenging to find answers without cooperation, activities together and customer requirements definition with the sales organizations. Buyers are also different and they differ how they prefer to be approached, how much information they need and how they make decisions. Anyhow, the salespeople need to have a deep knowledge of a different buyers' to be able to help buyers' to see their possibilities [1], [5], [20].

The Myers-Briggs personality theory has particular relevance for the sales organizations since following buyers' needs, interaction, and behaviors in buyer-seller encounters will help to identify the personal level expectations of a buyer. One study of a successful buyer-seller relationships found that buyers (here purchasing-agents) and sellers were classified into a small number of personality types and revealed similarity with Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) [4]. Multiple studies in Finland have also been able to classify managers with these same personality types by using the MBTI [10], [14]-[16].

MBTI is a personality indicator which illustrates the relationships with personality types and particular behavior. MBTI is based on personality theory and it is an assessment tool for understanding psychological preferences for using the four dichotomies: Extraversion – Introversion, Sensing – Intuition, Thinking – Feeling and Judging – Perceiving. MBTI contains 16 personality types, which are different kind of combinations of the dichotomies [12].

In MBTI indicator the Extroversion reflects the orientation to the outer world of people and the Introversion inner world of concepts and ideas. The Sensing measures individual's perceptions that are likely to rely on observable facts or on Intuition relying on meanings, relationships and possibilities. The third scale extent the decision making where Thinking reflects the logical consequences and whether something perceived to be true or false and the Feeling on subjective

feelings proceeded with personal or social values. The last scale is extended by Briggs and Myers based to Jung's work. In this scale the Judgment measures the individual adopts a judging attitude and aims to regulate and control his or her life and Perception extent being relatively open minded and preferring to adapt to what happens [12].

Results show that the most common sellers' personality type was the most common type also by buyers. The researched most common personality types of the buyers types were ESTJ and ISTJ, altogether 52,5 percent of the respondents [4] got one of these types profile. If we just look at the functional pairs, the letters in MBTI and in the middle, we find that on buyers the most common pairs was in this study ST [4].

Functional pair ST reveals a sensing and thinking preferences and this means that with these buyers' types the salesperson should focus on facts. In an interaction, ST-customer focuses on the specific details and to the logical implication of these specifics. Other researchers have results of a management level where function pair ST has been privilege over the other while pair NT has been playing supportive role [10]. For the NT-pair buyers is important to focus on logical options with which to fill unique needs. In an interaction the NT-customer tends to focus on the general concept or big picture and to how large picture possibilities create logical options [12]. The aforementioned study in Finland on manager's personality types is comparative with these results and the type ENTJ seems to be a common type between managers [15].

Many scholars have studied the model of adaptive selling and the need for salespeople to adapt their behavior to the customer's behavior [19]. Although, [5] reveals that salesperson's personality type didn't have significant unilateral influence to sales performance or to a trust towards salesperson. However, they found that if the buyer perceives similarity with the salesperson, it is linked to sales performance and the buyers' perception of a positive sales relationship.

Buyer-seller encounters builds up on to an interaction with the persons who meets which is based to cognitive processes, personality and needs [12]. On this point of view the salesperson isn't the only one affect the sales, hence the outcomes of the sales effort are the results of an interaction between buyer and seller. It can be said that the salespeople today build specific value into a relationship in interaction situations with the business buyer [1], [21].

Concerning the value creation literature, it is seen that the value is produced in between the buyer and seller, in an interaction. The interaction between the business buyer and salespeople is an important action for the businesses. These encounters are situations to relate each other's and combine actives and resources. This is why the interaction should be seen as having the value itself. Value is a certain relationship and enacted by parties in interaction and in each buyer-seller interactions each party will develop the ideas themselves which is creating value to them [9]. Still there is a lack of knowledge how value is created in practice and what is the

role of interaction in value creation [17].

Reference [17] explained the interaction as a value itself with a theory of organizing where members of organizations seek to gather information, which they try to interpret. Organizing is defined to as something what happens when individuals communicate. In one study [17] of value creation and communication the researchers used a theory to illustrate three communicative skills as attentiveness, perceptiveness and responsiveness. The attentiveness is defined as a supporter of customers' cognitive elements of customers' value process and in this the focus is on customer. Secondly, perceptiveness support the cognitive, behavioral and emotional aspects by reflecting the listener's attempt to understand the message and thirdly, responsiveness, which support the customers' cognitive as well as value creation by reflecting the level of understanding or agreement between the interaction parties.

A study [17] was made between customers and customer service representatives' (CSR). CSRs profession in on a frontline like the sales profession do and they're often, both professions, the primary point of contact before, during and after the first purchase and due to this the human interaction is essential in both cases. These communicative skills are important in buyer-seller encounters in order for the salesperson to assess the buyer to understand better the buyers' personality and expectations to the interaction (attentiveness), while interpreting the customers' needs and asking more questions (perceptiveness) and while the customer is restating the salesperson's question to make sure, that he or she has interpret or understood correctly the meaning (responsiveness).

Reducing customers' uncertainty and help the customer feel comfortable is relevant for personal and relationship selling, when salespersons' need to map customers' needs, motives and cues of customer behaviors that salesperson know what to do next [1], [5], [11], [19]. In these situations is important to understand the behavior and expectations of different personal types and to have a skills to lead the interaction to find the customers real needs. One study [20] found that there is a gap how customers and business suppliers think about the customer needs. They argue that high percentage of core needs of a customer are either overlooked or neglected by suppliers. While the aim is in business to build long-term relationships, the salespersons should be able to find the customers' real needs and act accordingly to build a comprehensive solution. One earlier mentioned study [17] also demonstrated that CSRs communicative skill responsiveness made it possible to reach mutual understanding between the customer and the salesperson, which is studied to be a vital aspect of value creation.

Nowadays salespersons encounters with the business buyers' are vital for the long-term relationships. Salesperson can add value to the business buyer by being part of their customers' conversations that is already occurring. The salespersons' should be able to challenge the existing paradigms and this way affect to buyers' decision making processes [5]. As act as a challenger and as a change architect in sales encounters need a high-level self-efficacy of a

salesperson. Self-efficacy, which means the person's belief about his/her capabilities to perform, was found to have a direct influence on the level of effort salesperson expended in selling tasks [11]. The high-level of self-efficacy might be seen as a confident behavior by business buyers' or can be perceived as acts like attentiveness, perceptiveness and responsiveness communication behavior.

III. RESEARCH APPROACH

This paper aims to reveal qualitatively the expectations of the business buyers towards buyer-seller encounters and what matters most in these encounters. The research goal is to analyze the business buyers' interviews and to find out their expectations and fulfilling the literature cap by contributing the marketing and sales literature with the empirical data of the expectations of the business buyers in complex business environment.

Our research method is qualitative and the semi-structured, open-ended interviews have been recorded, documented and analysed thematically. We got the buyers to this research via our larger on-going research project where we research eight service companies in Finland and B2B-selling. Four of the companies are big, internationally working and the rest of the companies are smaller. These business buyers are the customers of these eight B2B-companies and were referred to us by their sales departments' salespersons. All of the informants had at least three years' experience of purchasing and they worked as a purchasing directors or managers, project managers, managing directors and as business directors.

IV. METHOD

We interviewed 17 business customers independently during the year 2014. One interview lasted about one hour and the questions asked covered questions on buyers' expectations about sales meetings, experiences of successful meetings and failed meetings and how differences of salespeople affect to the meetings. We also questioned that what is valuable for the buyers in a meetings. The interviews were made at the business buyer's offices, in a silent environment.

The method we used for analysis was thematic. We tried to find themes based on the theory from the data concerning customer expectations. We analysed the data individually and brought up the findings. After this we compared these findings and noticed that the findings were same in research group. After this, the citations to these themes were chosen. It may be said whereas the findings of the data were agreed by research group that the validity of themes was high.

V. KEY FINDINGS

Based on our analysis three critical selling aspects were identified that define business buyers' expectations.

A. Business Buyers' Expect to Perceive Similar Personality Approach in a Sales Meeting than They Are

The personality matter was what business buyers' raised up in interviews openly. The fact that businesses concentrate on

long-term relationships was the base for that why the seller's personality type approach was important for the business buyers'. One business buyer said while discussed about the things, which are important in purchasing that *"...because I'm a buyer and I know... that for these products there are many sellers, so it might be... that if I don't feel like cooperating with this person in the future... I'll ask for other offers and I try to find another person to cooperate with... because I'm the decision maker and the one searching for a supplier... I need to be sure that there is going to be good and easygoing cooperation..."*

And one said *"...it is important that it is easy to talk with a seller... that you speak the same language, and that it is easy to get along... it is important especially after the purchase decision has been made... that you know that you'll get the support also afterwards..."* and *"I just go with the one that I feel that the relationship feel the best... I mean with the one... that is just natural to do things... with the one the relating was kind of relaxing..."* or *"you just want that the person responses to the things to which you're interested in..."* or *"with someone's it is just easier than with the others... of course the facts also... but this psychological thing is somehow more important..."*. And even one business customer said that *"of course, if there are two sellers who have the same offering, I would buy from the one who I like more"*.

Based to the interviews, it was a clear implication that the personality fit matters. Business buyers aim to build long-term relationships and the perceived feeling about potential cooperation in the future remarks. Even when the business buyers' had the competitive situation between the salespersons one business customer illustrated: *"of course it might be in a situation... if the prices have been looked to be in the right level... so that the personality might be the reason which makes the last choice point... that how I make the buying decision..."*

B. Business Buyers' Expect the Salesperson to Take Responsibility in the Meetings to Help the Customer to Find His or Her Real Needs and to Offer the Solution to These Needs

The interviews show that the salespersons have a lot to do to find the buyers' real needs in buyer-seller encounters. Business buyers complained salespersons attitude and their interest towards the buyer. One buyer said *"it is just that there aren't enough questions about the customer's needs... that you just go with your product or with the service..."* and one when asking how salespersons map the needs *"...that they are really individual... I understand that it is really difficult to find good salespersons... but I think... it is more about the attitude, that others just have a basic package what they sell and they're not really interested what the customer really needs.. it's more what they have in their portfolio... and the others then are truly interested in what we need and they try to fit their offering to us that way..."*

Business buyers related the need identification to the salespersons attitude, not to the skills. Here one says *"...if the salesperson's attitude is arrogant or feels like he doesn't*

care... so in these cases it is really easy to stop the discussions there... you feel that you don't want to continue with this person anymore or you don't want either in the future...". The salesperson's attitude was important for the buyers and one buyer described *"of course the whole meeting affects but if he has been listening... but still just leaves the things open... it is not confident... and if you just come up with the feeling that the case isn't going to be handled... that he hasn't understood our needs and he doesn't take them seriously... so it just feels that our case isn't important..."*.

Even in the cases when the price was negotiated and the buyers thought that it was on right level buyer pointed *"plus they need to be truly interested about it... that it's not just an offer between the other offers... that they also show that they're interested in our decision..."*.

When asking have the sales meetings changed somehow in ten years the business buyers' said that the time for the meetings is decreased and there isn't time to waste: *"the meetings are shorter and things need to happen much faster... added value need to be created in a much more shorter time..."* and by asking that how the salespersons should develop their working, one buyer responded: *"yes... they could actually think a bit more about that relationship thing... if you really think that it's discussion about the long-term relationship building... not about short-term goals... but that, they should really concentrate in seeing how during the meetings... how the cooperation develops... so that is that... when they just sell the thing that they got and how it works... but ok, if we do the cooperation so what we got now ... it is not important at all... the importance lie in where we are going together..."*.

After the interviews and documenting, it was interpreted that the buyer's would like to spend their time some other way than in pointless meetings hearing of the sales organizations products, features and benefits. One buyer added: *"that it is of course important that the salesperson listens and identifies our needs but it would be beneficial to us that they will tell us how these products and services help our life... not so that we after the meeting try to think that what do we do with these solutions.... that is something we don't want to spend our time on..."*

It was found that in the salesperson's skills level concerning the need identification might be seen differences. One buyer reflected his working history on purchasing and reflected: *"it is so from other side to the other... they've really different kind of knowledge in this... some of the salespersons do really have skills but the others don't..."*. While the interviewer where asking the reasons for this and is the possibly reason the work experience, a buyer said *"I don't think so. I think the attitude towards the customer is the thing. That you're naturally interested in the customer and you want to listen the customer and you just do questions... that you don't start within that attitude that you know already all the meaningful things... no, it is not about the age, it is about the attitude..."*

C. Business Buyers' Expect the Salespersons to be Confidence on Their Own Skills and Capabilities and Do Their Job as Promised

Interviews illustrate the buyers' expectations towards salespersons' performance in the buyer-seller encounters. The business buyers highlighted several times that it is not about the sales person's age or about the working experience. It is like one buyer said: *"I think it is the professionalism, the things that you focus on... That you're able to explain, how the offered solutions could fit into our business area and to us... this kind of professional behavior is something that I put my attention to..."* or *"it doesn't matter if you don't know but if you admit it and are able to find out... and then after a couple of hours I got the email from this salesperson... that he checked it and it goes like this..."*

The activities after the sales meeting were accounted as an important aspect announced by business buyers. Additionally, the buyers accounted the systematic behavior style in follow-ups and the preciseness with the starting times at the meetings. When asking about the elements of unsuccessful meetings the business customers articulated the importance of preparation before the meetings. They brought aspects like: *"...some signals could be if the person is late and if the papers are not in the order... or the situation isn't somehow handled... if they haven't prepared... or "they don't know anything about our business..."* and *"you assume that they have visited our website... but many doesn't have a clue..."*

VI. DISCUSSION

This study shows that the perceived similarities in personality types matter and is even more important in buyer-seller encounters than earlier. It might even be an excuse not to start cooperation if the buyers' and sellers' approaches to communicate don't match. Sales has transformed from transactional selling towards relationship building. Business buyers meet the salespersons when they have a need develop their business. Often the businesses by themselves move to a stage where they need to do changes. In these cases they start to analyse the possible partners for the cooperation. The task for the sales organizations seems to be here the change architect, who maps the customers' business problem, their needs and wants and offers the complex solution to this need, on that way how the buyers' want the value added.

The value here could be seen intangible, something which is produced in co-creation with the salesperson and the representatives of the customer organization. It is something which may consist of the co-operating persons' interests, of their personality preferences, of their beliefs and of the business needs. The expected solution pounded with the value creation is unique and is fitted to this long-term relationship. It might be something which is not easy to change and is built for a longer time.

The results of this study may have brought one new aspect to the salespersons' profession. While interviewing the business buyers of unsuccessful buyer-seller encounters, the buyers talked about the sellers' attitude towards their needs. It may be interpreted that there might be areas for developing the salesperson's attitude. It may also be assumed that the skills for need identification require development. Results show that salespersons focus to their own products and services more

than to business buyer. This may be interpreted that the salespeople don't appreciate or take seriously enough the buyer and the buyers' needs and wants. It may be also interpreted as poor sales skills in need identification. Although, the business buyers interviews could be analysed that they are seriously building long-term relationships and trying to find solutions how to develop their business with chosen sales organization. If the business buyer was not satisfied to salesperson's accountability, it might be a reason to meet other possible sales organizations and their salespersons'.

The business buyers' seem to appreciate preciseness in salespersons' behavior. Based on the researches of the personality types, the most common personality types for the manager's in Finland are ISTJ, ESTJ and ENTJ and for the purchasing manager's types ESTJ and ENTJ. This means that the types with functional pair ST appreciate personalized facts, responsible acting and logical implications. Hence, the functional pair NT extends the general concept, big picture possibilities and values, which fit in the needs now and in the future. In addition to this, all these types prefer the preference Judging, J and this preference admires organized style of life. The results might show that the business buyers' preferences relate to the earlier studies [4], [15], [16].

VII. CONCLUSION

This study show what kind of expectations do the business buyers' have towards buyer-seller encounters in this changed complex business environment. Resulting of chosen qualitative research methodology, this study help to understand deeper the phenomenon of B2B buyer-seller encounters and how the complexity affects to buyers' expectations.

This study demonstrates that the importance of the different personalities and their expectations plays a key role in nowadays business relationships due to the aim to build up long-term cooperation. While aiming to short-term relationships, the personality type affect may be lower.

In long-term relationships, which increase businesses competitive advantage, the cooperation partners and the persons' similarity is important. Similarities in personality types affect to aim the goal of expectations. This study found three important aspects of expectations which may affect to the salespersons' success in the sales meetings. These expectation aspects are perceived personality similarity, attitude and responsibility, confident behavior and preciseness.

For the future research, it would be beneficial to know what specifically the process of selling value is in the complex contemporary business environment and how should the sales persons proceed in a meeting at the point in which new buyer-seller meetings have decreased.

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